

LIKENESS IN HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON'S PHOTO-PORTRAITS

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After the invention of photography, modern theoreticians were hopeful that photography's faithfulness to nature would resolve painterly deficiencies by providing a more recognizable and convincing reproduction. Paradoxically, the advent of photography did not improve upon painting's failures, but exhibited an inherent problem. In particular, aspects of temporality hindered photography's ability to reproduce a convincing likeness. Concerning this issue, Gombrich opines that it could be "[...] true to say that we never see [in reality] what the instantaneous photograph reveals, for we gather up successions of movements, and never see static configurations as such."¹ Because the constant motion of the eyes as well as the ephemeral nature of existence limits perception, I am studying the techniques used to convey aspects of "likeness" in the celebrity photo-portraits by Henri Cartier-Bresson. To establish what stylistic choices contribute to a recognizable portrait, I will analyze Bresson's photographic methods which he delineated in "The Decisive Moment."

Bresson's concept of the decisive moment, far from falling within modernist accounts of photography's medium specificity, actually traces back to a much older discussion, one concerned with unearthing relations between photographs and paintings. As examples of this discussion, I look to ideas expressed by late nineteenth-century photographer-scientist Francis

¹ Ernst Hans Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye: Further studies in the psychology of pictorial representation*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982, p. 50.

Galton and police officer Alphonse Bertillon. These theorists ascertained that photographs are not representative of a sum-total or synthetic image which humans perceive, but are indicative of an imperceptible instant. While Bresson's conception of photographic likeness relates to ideas espoused by Francis Galton, I also prove that Bresson's work is distinct from Galton's as it relates to human typicality. Whereas Galton's ideas concerning likeness relate to a need to arrive at ideal types, a comparison of Bresson's work with broader developments in the history of the concept of objectivity and image making reveals the ways in which Bresson's conception of typicality is distinct from that of Galton.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Born during *la belle époque*, Henri Cartier-Bresson was a photographer whose work continues to evoke the optimism which characterized this period of European ascendancy. After experimenting with Surrealism in the 1920's, Bresson ultimately became well-known for his career as a photo-journalist. This livelihood both supported his interest in travelling and furnished alluring subject matter in Asia, America, and Europe. Bresson's photographic endeavors were not confined to reportage, but included a prolific production of photo-portraits, as well as thematic essays intended as a reflection on his artistic output. Though his photographs were intended to serve journalistic purposes, his body of work, as well as his most celebrated essay entitled "The Decisive Moment," has afforded scholars rich resources on which to base their research.

Secondary literature on Bresson's "The Decisive Moment" often focuses attention on this account in relation to his career as a photo-journalist. Similarly, academics also use this idea of the "decisive moment" to shed light on and provide a framework for Bresson's personal photographic canon. Bresson's concept of the decisive moment, far from falling within modernist accounts of photography's medium specificity, actually traces back to a much older discussion, one concerned with unearthing relations between photographs and paintings. As examples of this discussion, I will look to ideas expressed by late nineteenth century photographer-scientist Francis Galton and police officer Alphonse Bertillon. To achieve the

most recognizable likeness, these theorists applied the techniques of painted portraiture, such as the total of instances or expressions garnered by the painter, to photography and thus conceived the relationship between painting and photography in terms of human vision and temporality. In defining the “decisive moment,” and thus establishing the extent to which a photograph “succeeds” or “fails,” Bresson’s work seems informed by similar ideas of perception, making his photo-portraits relate more to the objectives of painting than to those of photography. While Bresson’s conception of photographic likeness relates to ideas espoused by Francis Galton, I will also prove that Bresson’s work is distinct from Galton’s as it relates to human typicality. Whereas Galton’s ideas concerning likeness relate to a need to arrive at ideal types, a comparison of Bresson’s work with broader developments in the history of the concept of objectivity and image making reveals the ways in which Bresson’s conception of typicality is distinct from that of Galton.

Simply defined, “likeness” refers to the extent to which a portrait manifestly represents its subject. Despite this, the aims of portraiture do not always require the provision of a recognizable likeness. Because an identifiable likeness is not always the artist’s primary objective, portrait artists must first establish what stylistic choices constitute a likeness. Apart from superficial concerns, artists encounter utilitarian issues such as the physiognomic function of the portrait. Traditionally, the goal of particular portraits was dictated to artists working under the auspices of affluent patrons. These patrons, anticipating the utility of such a representation as an eternalizing memorial to themselves, sought aggrandized portrayals. Extant research on portraiture is not limited to the relationship between patron and artist, but often focuses on the means with which artists depict a particular person as well as the psychology concerning pictorial representation, perception and recognition. While artists often aim to portray their sitters

in a manner such that others will recognize them, they are also aware of stylistic choices concerning compositional complexity and color.

Debates concerning the idea of “likeness” date to antiquity and were addressed by Aristotle and Plato. Although recent arguments advanced by theorists, such as Aleksandr Rodchenko have hailed photographic media as supreme over painting, artistic theory concerning pictorial likeness has not reached a consensus. E.H. Gombrich, in his book *The Image and the Eye*, explores different avenues concerning likeness and highlights several aspects of temporality that cause the rendering of likeness a difficult task to master. Artists are assigned the complex mission of depicting a specific or spontaneous instant in a world that is not static. More specifically, Gombrich gives voice to the problems surrounding temporal perception by suggesting that humankind sees

[...] the relatively permanent forms of the face standing out against the relatively mobile ones and thus form a provisional estimate of their interaction. It is this dimension of time, above all, that we lack in the interpretation of a still. Like many pictorial problems, the problem of portrait likeness and expression is compounded here, as we have seen, by the artificial situation of arrested movement. Movement always assists in confirming or refusing our provisional interpretations or anticipations, and hence our reading of the static images of art is particularly prone to large variations and contradictory interpretations.²

He goes even further to explain that since humankind does not view the world statically, artists construct compositions in such a way that static moments, like that in a painting or photograph, can be recognizable to an audience. For example, use of symbolic attributes is one means with which an audience can easily recognize a figure in a painting, and the use of symbols has been an invaluable tool in the depiction and recognition of Christian iconography. Elements of attribution are not, however, a panacea for the problems surrounding likeness. For this problem,

² Ernst Hans Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye: Further studies in the psychology of pictorial representation*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982, p. 126.

Gombrich provides a solution by advising portraitists to “[...] exploit the ambiguities of the arrested face [so] that the multiplicities of possible readings result in the semblance of life.”³

Although painting was often considered more of an art than was photography, modern theoreticians were hopeful that the undistorted or true to life nature of photography would resolve painterly deficiencies by providing a more recognizable and convincing reproduction. Conversely, the advent of photography did not improve upon painting’s failures, but shared an inherent problem. As in painting, aspects of temporality hindered photography’s ability to reproduce a convincing likeness. Concerning this issue, Gombrich opines that it could be “[...] true to say that we never see [in reality] what the instantaneous photograph reveals, for we gather up successions of movements, and never see static configurations as such.”⁴ By this, he suggests that the constant motion of the eyes as well as the ephemeral nature of existence limits perception.

Artistic theory concerning photography has often hailed photo-portraiture as the preferential mode of capturing a likeness as explored by Russian avant-garde artist Aleksandr Rodchenko. In his article “Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot,” Rodchenko defends the supremacy and superiority of photography as the technique of obtaining a likeness that is most free from distortion. He concedes that painted portraits are comprised of a “synthetic,” or “sum-total” of a person’s physical qualities.⁵ Unlike a painting which contains a multitude of isolated moments, a photographer captures a series of instants and seizes individual expressions. Along these lines, he praises photography for its faithfulness to nature and thus its ability to

³ Gombrich, p. 117.

⁴ Ibid., p. 50.

⁵ Aleksandr Rodchenko, “Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot.” *Russian art of the avant-garde: theory and criticism, 1902-1934*. 1928. John E. Bowl. New York: Viking Press, 1976, p. 238.

capture “[...] a precise moment documentarily.”⁶ Additionally, he discredits painting by declaring that:

It should be stated firmly that with the appearance of photographs, there can be no question of a single, immutable portrait. Moreover, a man is not just one sum total; he is many and sometimes they are quite opposed. By means of a photograph or other documents, we can debunk any artistic synthesis produced by one man or another.⁷

In other words, he suggests that a series of photographs and even writing creates the most reliable “synthesis” of a person’s likeness rather than one painted portrait which draws largely on idealized elements.⁸ Furthermore, Rodchenko lauds photography as superior to painting because of its “scientific” usefulness. While a painting can suggest that a particular person had brown hair, a photograph may confirm what this person’s hair looked like at a particular instant. In other words, a painting constructs an eternal image comprised of “common truths” while photography unearths more specific problems, such as how a person’s hair looked when he or she first woke up.

Akin to Rodchenko, whose argument highlights distinctions between painted and photographed portraiture, Edward Weston, an exponent of photographic modernism, suggests that there exists an inherent difference between photography and painting in that photography is not pictorial. Until the 1920’s, photography as an art strived to realize the objectives of painting. In 1930, Weston wrote “Photography—Not Pictorial” suggesting that the objectives of painting should not inform photography.⁹ Emphasizing the dissimilarities between painting and photography, Weston claims that photographs are capable of capturing elements indiscernible to the unaided eye, a feature confirmed in earlier experiments by Eadweard Muybridge. Likewise,

⁶ Rodchenko, p. 239.

⁷ Ibid., p. 241.

⁸ Ibid., p. 241.

⁹ Edward Weston, “Photography—Not Pictorial,” *Camera Craft*, Vol. 37, No. 7, 1930, pp. 313-320.

he underscores technical distinctions between these media in that one must “[...] learn to think photographically and not in terms of other media [...]” because a photographer is “[...] restricted by the size of his camera, the focal length of his lens, the certain grade of dry plate or film, and the printing process he is using [...].”¹⁰ In an article written thirteen years later, titled “Seeing Photographically,” he further accentuates differences between photography and painting by noting the fact that there exist two aspects “[...] in the photographic process that set it apart from the other graphic arts: the nature of the recording process and the nature of the image.”¹¹ Because of these inherent differences, Weston substantiates the idea that the objects of painting cannot apply to photography.

In a similar vein, Roger Scruton illustrates differences between painting and photography by disclosing the latter’s representational deficiencies in his essay “Photography and Representation.” To debunk the notion that photography is representational, Scruton argues that a photograph is an exact replica of its subject whereas a painting does not necessarily provide an image of reality.¹² Likewise, “[...] if one finds a photograph beautiful, it is because one finds something beautiful in its subject. A painting may be beautiful, on the other hand, even when it represents an ugly thing.”¹³ In relation to portraiture, Scruton asserts that painted and photographed portraits diverge in respects to temporality.¹⁴ Moreover, he claims that photography “[...] is thought of as revealing something momentary about its subject—how the subject looked at a particular moment [...],” but “Portrait painting, however, aims to capture the sense of time and to represent its subject as extended in time, even in the process of displaying a

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 313-320.

¹¹ Edward Weston, “Seeing Photographically,” *The Complete Photographer*, Vol. 9, No. 49, 1943, pp. 3200-3206.

¹² Roger Scruton, “Photography and Representation.” *Critical Inquiry*. 7.3 (Spring, 1981), p. 590.

¹³ Ibid., p. 590.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 586.

particular moment of its existence.”¹⁵ In essence, Scruton critiques the transitory nature of photography as inhibiting its ability to represent permanency in the way a painted portrait can. Like Weston, Scruton believes that photography cannot be judged in terms of painting, but Scruton justifies his logic on the belief that photography is nonrepresentational.

It would be expected that Henri Cartier-Bresson, as a proponent of photojournalism, would espouse an ideology coinciding with that of Rodchenko who somewhat naively praised photography’s authenticity and absolute truth to nature, and that of Scruton, who philosophically undermines photography’s ability to evoke a subjective representation. It also seems plausible that Bresson’s photographic ideology would align with contemporary art theorists such as Weston because he achieved great fame around the world and among contemporary Modernists. Yet, Bresson’s “The Decisive Moment” delineates a photographic canon contrary to modern conceptions concerning photography and also places emphasis on the role of the photographer’s artistic instinct.

This research is significant because of its relevance to current academic debates and theories concerning photo-portraiture and photography as an art. It is necessary to question how Bresson defined pictorial likeness because his body of work was largely devoted to photo-journalism, a field whose main virtue was likeness or “authenticity.” This investigation establishes the theories which enlightened Bresson’s photographic methods and provides academics with more insight into the art and ideology of one of the most famous photographers of the twentieth century. Through Bresson’s photo-portraits, this study also reveals the ways in which photographers attend to notions of likeness, and the ways in which the aims of painting can successfully inform photography. Finally, I will show that, although his conception of

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 586-587.

likeness relates to ideas conveyed by Francis Galton, Bresson's understanding of human types is distinct from the way in which Galton's system of recognition and perception serves to corroborate biological types.

To substantiate this argument, this essay will first illuminate reciprocal credenda expressed through the writings of nineteenth century photographer-scientist Francis Galton, and Alphonse Bertillon, a police officer who systemized criminal identification through photography. Then, the study will clarify the context in which "The Decisive Moment" was written, as well as define the instant which inspired the article's title. Following this, the argument will prove how Bresson's photographic standards and ideas relate to the conceptions of likeness proffered by Galton and Bertillon, as well as how these ideas relate towards the aims of painting, situating his art in a larger tradition of portraiture. Though Bresson's conception of likeness is consonant with that of Galton, an evaluation of Bresson's work as compared with certain developments in the history of image making and the notion of "objectivity" reveal the ways in which his work diverges from Galton's in relation to human typicality.

2.0 THE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN PAINTED AND PHOTOGRAPHIC LIKENESS AS EXEMPLIFIED BY GALTON AND BERTILLON

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, many different users of the photographic medium based their endeavors on asserting a certain correlation between human vision and photography, a relatively new event. Several of these scholars, including Galton, predicated their scientific claims on the idea that a correlation exists between human vision and photography. More important to this essay is not necessarily the means by which these scientists substantiated this claim, but how their allegations relate to painted and photographed likeness. To verify his hypotheses, Galton suggested that “[...] the way a photographic plate takes impressions [is analogous to] [...] the way the human sensorium does so.”¹⁶ However, photographic studies such as Muybridge’s *Study of Equine Motion* revealed photography’s visual superiority and likewise, humankind’s perceptual deficiencies. It was Muybridge’s series of twelve photographs that established the fact that as a horse runs, all four hooves come off the ground.¹⁷ In concert with studies of this sort, scientists realized that photographs are capable of disclosing information imperceptible to the human eye.

In order to justify his original hypotheses, namely that a similarity exists between physical and mechanical vision, Galton reevaluated his ideas concerning human perception. In

¹⁶ Josh Ellenbogen, “Educated Eyes and Impressed Images.” *Art History* 33 (June, 2010), p. 494.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.496.

essence, Galton posited that humans perceived the world by a series of sense impressions which, unlike a photograph, garnered one composite image.¹⁸ To account for the imperceptibility of instantaneous motion, such as a horse in mid-gallop, Galton, as well as Bertillon, intimated that human perception is largely informed by moments of repose.¹⁹ Looking closely at the work of Galton, it becomes manifest that “For Galton, depictions that show instants of rest or repose will show moving objects in the most plausible way. He explicitly holds that, because the mind is exposed to such positions longest, it will be these restful positions that impress themselves most deeply upon it.”²⁰

Ideas concerning the perception of mobility can also apply to notions concerning likeness. As expressed by Ellenbogen,

Although, to the extent that an individual’s composite characterized the person, more unusual and fleeting expressions would be contained in it as logical possibilities, the portrait itself only shows repose. Given the reason why the moment of repose is privileged in the representation of movement, it seems Galton must hold that mental images of individuals come to be in an identical way: a series of resembling impressions are stamped on top of each other, producing a synthetic image on the sensitized registration surface of the mind.²¹

Pertaining to likeness, it would follow that human perception and recognition is informed primarily by a combination of “constant” expressions of the human face in repose, rather than “variable” moments such as a yawn or frown. In regard to likeness, Galton’s argument also insinuates or provides reason for inherent distinctions between painted and photographed portraiture.²² Akin to Rodchenko’s derision of painting as an “inauthentic” means of capturing a likeness, Galton opines that painted portraiture is comprised of a sum-total of observed moments.

¹⁸ Ellenbogen p. 495.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 495.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 495.

²¹ Ibid., p. 497.

²² Ibid., p. 495.

However, unlike Rodchenko, Galton's proposal suggests that painted portraiture is a physical manifestation of human perception. To contend with painted portraiture, Galton formulates a more precise materialization of perceived likeness through composite or superimposed photographs. His conception implies that humankind has "[...] 'portraits' or pictures stamped on our minds, itself a strange proposition, but that the impressed pictures come to be by a process he models on photography [...] [thus], in Galton's estimate, all our general ideas of types come from the composite pictures the mind makes [...]."²³

Like Galton, Alphonse Bertillon confronted the issues surrounding photographic likeness in his book *Exécution D'un Portrait Judiciaire*. In attempting to collate a systematic approach toward criminal photography, Bertillon first answered "Comment Doit-On Faire Un Portrait Judiciaire." Hoping to catch recidivists, Bertillon's photographs needed to facilitate recognition and identification.²⁴ In capturing a recognizable likeness, he urged that the criminal

[...] ne portera pas sur les poses excentriques, extraordinaires, qui ne durent qu'une fraction de seconde et qui, par cela même, échappent à la rapidité de perception de l'œil. Ce seront, croyons-nous, les poses de demi-repos, celles qui sont représentées le plus grand nombre de fois dans la série, qui reproduiront le plus exactement l'image mentale et idéale dont vous désirez conserver par devers vous un exemplaire.²⁵

As Muybridge's *Study of Equine Motion* convinced Galton of photography's refined acuity, Bertillon seemed ready to accept that human vision is limited to perceiving and recognizing "constant" expressions, or moments of "repose." Similar to Galton, Bertillon also believed in "[...] la superiorité du portrait (quand il est bien fait), sur la meilleure des photographies [...]."²⁶

²³ Ibid., p. 494.

²⁴ Alphonse Bertillon, *La Photographie Judiciaire*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 1890, p. 3.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

On the other hand, Bertillon expressed reservations towards the subjective nature of painted portraiture while celebrating photography's documentary and thus, precise qualities.²⁷

From the work of Galton and Bertillon, it can be inferred that photography posed new and interesting questions concerning human perception. To explain photographic visual phenomena, namely the ability to discern moments inconceivable to an unaided eye, Galton developed a conception of visual recognition that relied on the incidence of sensory impressions.²⁸ His ideas concerning sense impressions did more than assume a schema of human perception, but clarified differences between painted and photographed portraiture. In particular, Galton established painted portraiture as a physical manifestation of human-kind's innate synthetic imaging system. Similarly, Bertillon ascertained that photographs are not representative of a sum-total or synthetic image which humans perceive, but are indicative of an imperceptible instant. Although photography's transitory qualities constrain its use as a recognizable means of capturing a likeness, scientists favored its faithfulness to nature. To vie with painted portraiture, Galton and Bertillon conceived of methods to manipulate or create a photographic likeness that best relates to human perception. Though their logic was skewed, these arguments concerning portraiture would serve as a foundation for the inherent differences between painting and photography, and seem to inform the artistic body of work by photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁸ Ellenbogen, p. 495.

3.0 **BRESSON'S APPROACH TO PHOTOGRAPHIC LIKENESS AS INFORMED BY STANDARDS OF PAINTING**

Henri Cartier-Bresson was intrigued by the means with which portraiture facilitates humankind's ability "[...] to trace the sameness of man."²⁹ In completing his body of celebrity photo-portraits, largely compiled in *Tête à Tête*, Bresson encountered questions concerning likeness similar to those raised by Galton and Bertillon. Though a visual analysis of Bresson's oeuvre may disclose facets of his artistic methodology, an outline of his techniques are found in his most famous essay "L'instant décisif." This essay, translated as "The Decisive Moment," was published in 1952 as a reflection on his career as a photo-journalist as well as his photographic methodology. In this essay, he describes his first experiences using a camera, as well as his professional development as a photographer. Throughout his writing, Bresson also collates photographic techniques which have informed his art. In particular, his artistic canon addresses several of photography's medium specific limitations, as well as how to approach subject matter. Although he does not explicitly cite Bertillon or Galton's photographic credenda, several elements of Bresson's writing mirror nineteenth-century concepts of likeness and academic art theory.

As previously discussed, photographic experimenters such as Galton and Bertillon conceded that the conventions of painted portraiture relate more closely to human perception

²⁹ Henri Cartier-Bresson, "The Decisive Moment." *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographers*. 1st ed. New York: Aperture, 1999.

than does photography. Given that this is true, paintings provide the most recognizable likeness. This premise was justified by the idea that a painted portrait is composed of a sum total of perceived instances, whereas a photographed portrait captures an instant imperceptible to humankind. Perhaps to contend with painted portraiture, Bresson seemed to apply the conventions of painting to his photographic process, specifically in the means with which he conceived photography's limitations of transitoriness and his approach towards subject matter, as well as the photographic selection process.

Galton founded his studies on the idea that there exists a relationship between human eyesight and photography. Bresson evokes a similar relationship with his camera, stating that "It [the Leica] became the extension of my eye, and I have never been separated from it since I found it."³⁰ In writing this, Bresson asseverates that human vision is comparable to that which is captured by a photographic lens. He further exposes the relationship between human perception and photography by explaining that "What the eye does is to find and focus on the particular subject within the mass of reality; what the camera does is simply to register upon film the decision made by the eye."³¹ Though Bresson, like Galton, conceived that a rapport existed between physical and mechanical vision, his argument's faults are manifest in his discussion of photography's transitory nature.

Similar to Galton and Bertillon, Bresson was aware of photography's medium specific limitations. In particular, Galton and Bertillon hypothesized that the basic distinction between painted and photographed portraiture lies in their relations to time. The instantaneous nature of photography was viewed as a limitation, whereas the time required for painted portraits contributed to a more recognizable likeness. Echoing Bertillon's discussion of judicial

³⁰ Bresson, "The Decisive Moment."

³¹ Ibid.

portraiture, which construes how photography can be employed to capture an undistorted likeness, Bresson asks “What is more fugitive and transitory than the expression on a human face?”³² In this statement, Bresson expresses the transitory nature of existence and encapsulates the central problem confronted by portraitists: which human expression is the most representative of a specific person? Bresson proffers that “The first impression given by a particular face is often the right one; but the photographer should try always to substantiate the first impression by ‘living’ with the person concerned. The decisive moment and psychology, no less than camera position, are the principal factors in the making of a good portrait.”³³ Like Galton and Bertillon, Bresson acknowledges that there is one expression that best captures a person’s likeness. Conversely, Bresson does not explicitly maintain that the most appropriate or identifiable facial idiom is the moment of repose, but suggests that the most recognizable likeness is apparent only after observation of the person in question. Despite this, Bresson’s writing implicitly advances the importance of the moment of repose in portraiture.

In a photo, Bresson “[...] craved to seize the whole essence, in the confines of one single photograph, of some situation that was in the process of unrolling itself before [his] eyes.”³⁴ This aim relates to the way Galton and Bertillon conceived of perception, as well as the objects of painted portraiture. Specifically, Galton surmised that human perception was informed by a series of “photographic” impressions in the mind. These impressions garnered one composite image or the “whole essence,” largely derived from moments of repose. Likewise, both Galton and Bertillon advocated the supremacy of painted portraiture because of its ability to capture several instants rather than one. Though Bresson does not construe visual likeness as a result of

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

sense-impressions or a repertory of cognitive images, his aim to capture the entire essence of a scene is a refutation of the transitory quality of the photographic media and proves that he thinks in terms of painting. The objects of painting also seem to inform his methodology, as he explains that “[...] inside movement there is one moment at which the elements in motion are in balance. Photography must seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it.”³⁵ Although Bresson does not describe the aesthetics of this moment, it seems to relate to Bertillon and Galton’s idea that the moment of repose best represents a constant or the whole.

The research conducted by Galton and Bertillon confirmed that the most recognizable likeness is one that features the sitter’s face in repose. As summarized by Brilliant, “[...] recognition seems to depend on establishing some relationship between the norm and its instant variation, so that, even in faces, individuality is contained within the boundaries of the familiar type.”³⁶ In other words, the aims of portrait artists are to capture the most recognizable features or constant moments such as repose. Paralleling these ideas, Bresson explains that “[...] it is possible to make pictures of the ‘core’ as well as the stuck-off sparks of the subject [...]”³⁷ Though this phrase describes the rhetoric of picture-stories, Bresson’s writing also seems to establish photography’s ability to capture moments representative of a whole, as well as ephemeral instants. Suggesting that a photograph can seize the “whole” implies that it shares similar qualities with painting, which is comprised of several static moments. Along these lines, Bresson also suggests that the aims of painting inform photographic likeness. He explains that

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts : Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 111.

³⁷ Bresson, “The Decisive Moment.”

“The true portrait emphasizes neither the suave nor the grotesque, but reflects the personality”³⁸ and thus, captures the whole.

Bresson explains that in order to seize the most recognizable likeness “The profession depends so much upon the relations the photographer establishes with the people he’s photographing, that a false relationship, a wrong word or attitude, can ruin everything. When the subject is in any way uneasy, the personality goes away where the camera can’t reach it.”³⁹ By this, he explains that facial expression is a reflection of the sitter’s psychology and thus, a feeling of uneasiness will distort the features most characteristic of the sitter. In other words, Bresson suggests that the most recognizable photo-portrait is not one which captures discomfort or a variable facial idiom, but is an expression most representative of the sitter.

By scrutinizing Bresson’s “The Decisive Moment,” it becomes manifest that his photographic standards are informed by nineteenth century concepts of likeness and the conventions of painting, rather than modernist theories of medium specificity. Similar to Galton, Bresson conceived of a relationship between human vision and photography. However, Bresson’s premise, like Galton’s, was unsound due to the transitory nature of photography. Bresson addressed this issue by suggesting that a photographer struggles against the instantaneous nature of photography to capture an entire essence of a situation rather than a particular moment. Like Galton, who viewed painted portraiture as the most recognizable means of obtaining a likeness because it captures a series of instances, Bresson’s aspiration to capture the “whole” relates to the methodology of painters. Likewise, in regard to portraiture, Bresson described a specific moment of “equilibrium” that is most representative of a person’s likeness. Relating his argument to ideas adopted by Galton and Bertillon, Bresson seemed to view the

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

moment of repose as the most recognizable facial expression. Despite the fact that Bresson was a modern artist, he worked against the methodologies and notions espoused by modern theorists by suggesting implicitly that the aims of painting can transfer to photography. Though he recognizes photography's limitations of transitoriness, Bresson's aims relate closely to that of a painter, and thus, it appears that he essays to apply the conventions of painting to photography.

4.0 BRESSON'S CONCEPTION OF HUMAN TYPICALITY AS DISTINCT FROM THAT OF FRANCIS GALTON

Bertillon's and Galton's schema of sense impressions actualized interesting habits of conceiving human likeness and movement, as well as what humans are capable and incapable of perceiving. In many respects, Bresson's artistic precepts, as set forth in "The Decisive Moment," are consonant with late nineteenth-century discussions on likeness, namely the supremacy of the moment of repose in convincingly conveying likeness or movement. In its original form, however, the notion of sensory impressions espoused by Bertillon and Galton also structured a framework for human typicality. Although Bresson's photographic canon treats likeness in a way that relates to Bertillon's and Galton's conception of facial recognition, Bresson does not understand human types in the strict or immutable way as does Galton. Rather than adopt a Galtonian understanding of typicality, which is exhaustive of individual identity, Bresson appears inclined to use nationality as a means of linking individuals, while also encouraging viewers to construct their own meanings. Distinct from Galton, who displays human types as a set of biological facts and genetic traits, Bresson takes individuality seriously and emphasizes human distinctiveness by providing a global survey of humanity. Though the way in which Bresson collates his work by nationality lends itself to typological study, he does not establish a catalogue definition of human types that aimed to give strict definitions. Rather, his conception of typicality builds on an audience's understanding of types that parallels certain broader

developments in the history of concepts of objectivity and image making. Daston and Galison have displayed what some of these ideas were in their seminal study involving atlas making. A comparison of Bresson's work to the strategies employed, and problems confronted by modern atlas makers, as elicited by the indexicality of photography, proves that Bresson would have disagreed with a Galtonian conception of typicality.

Daston and Galison, in their article "The Image of Objectivity," trace the evolving meanings of objectivity by looking at one chapter in the history of the concept of mechanical objectivity. As examples of the shift between pre-modern and nineteenth-century conceptions of objectivity, the authors elucidate several visual conventions for the presentation of scientific data before and after the advent of photography. As a representation of this shift, their argument details the history of atlas making in relation to the notion of "objectivity," evoking the emergence of a stigma attaching to human "subjectivity," or human intervention within scientific disciplines. Whereas modern conceptions of science tried to evade human artistry and subjectivity, eighteenth-century scientists used painting and drawing to accurately convey nature.⁴⁰ Although conceptions of objectivity shifted alongside the development of mechanical practices as seen through photography, atlas makers were historically and are contemporaneously confronted by several representational problems. Specifically,

All atlas makers must solve the problem of choice: Which objects should be presented as the standard phenomena of the discipline, and from which viewpoint? In the late nineteenth century, these choices triggered a crisis of anxiety and denial, for they seemed invitations to subjectivity, but in earlier periods atlas makers faced up to their task with considerably more confidence and candor.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, "The Image of Objectivity." *Representations*, No. 40, Special Issue: Seeing Science (Autumn, 1992), p. 87.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

Though pre-modern scientists posited that subjective renderings could be representative of truth, the invention of and use of photography as a scientific instrument corresponded to an estrangement of the “subjective” from the true, or rather human craftsmanship from scientific reality.

Prior to the advent of photography, artists created visual diagrams to illustrate scientific data. In order to render scientific entities “objectively,” these scientists prescribed a series of guidelines that privileged universal representations of a given subject. Throughout history, “The purpose of these atlases was and is to standardize the observing subjects and observed objects of the discipline by eliminating idiosyncrasies—not only those of individual observers but also those of individual phenomena.”⁴² In other words, by making visual phenomena conform to a higher and more “perfect” ideal, artists employed generic types to represent nature faithfully and to homogenize science visually. For example, “[...] Albinus believed that universals such as his perfect skeleton had equivalent ontological warrant to particulars, and that the universal might be represented in a particular picture, if not actually embodied in a particular skeleton.”⁴³ While the creation of universals gives rise to problems surrounding deviant instances, as well as a distortion from what is natural, it is clear that “No science can do without such standardized working objects, for unrefined natural objects are too quirkily particular to cooperate in generalizations and comparisons.”⁴⁴ It is for this reason that Galton attended to the universal, namely through human types.

By the nineteenth-century, visual representations of scientific data continued to privilege a faithful or accurate depiction of nature, but the manner in which scientists reached a standard

⁴² Daston and Galison, pp. 84-85.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 91.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 85.

of the faithful changed. A growing concern within scientific communities was the extent to which a visual diagram, made by the hand of a human, could be free from human impositions. Specifically, scientists became concerned with human subjectivity as this concerns artistic craftsmanship and distortion, as well as human selection and judgment. Though photography freed scientific imagery from human intervention, there still existed a problem surrounding representation.⁴⁵ In particular, “[...] later atlas makers were considerably more anxious about the subjectivity implicit in judgments of typicality. Conflicts between truth to type and truth to the individual specimen brought this new anxiety over judgment into the open.”⁴⁶ While figures, such as Francis Galton, used photography to authenticate or to disclose distinguishable traits of a given type, some scientists believed that “[...] the most a picture could do was to serve as a signpost, announcing that this or that individual anatomical configuration stands in the domain of the normal.”⁴⁷ To resolve the problems surrounding human artistry, scientists espoused photo-mechanical techniques, which aimed to provide imagery uncorrupted by human intervention. In doing so, these scientists employed images of individuals rather than generalized types.⁴⁸ Imagery featuring precise detail and the individual appealed to scientists hoping to refrain from making judgments that would subjectively confirm or deny specific traits as characteristic of a given type. Unlike Galton, whose photographic methods tendered ideal or generic types, many nineteenth-century scientists rejected such idealized interpretations. Fearing subjectivity, which risks the accuracy, authenticity and credibility of scientific data, scientists working with individualized or indexical imagery confronted a new problem in that “The typical must now be

⁴⁵ Daston and Galison p. 98.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 96.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 107.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 98.

instantiated in the individual, but [that] the typical nonetheless exists, to be discerned by judgment and long acquaintance with the phenomena.”⁴⁹

Underscoring the notion that photographs cannot produce universal types is the idea that photography has indexical qualities. Because instantaneous photography captures specific objects or entities with precision, a photograph is often considered to be an index, or a sign brought into being by a causal connection with a signifier or the subject. Photography arrives at scientific standards of indexicality as “It is the order of the natural world that imprints itself on the photographic emulsion and subsequently on the photographic print. This quality of transfer or trace gives to the photograph its documentary status, its undeniable veracity.”⁵⁰ According to art historians, such as Rosalind Krauss, because a photograph is an index it is limited to the individual rather than the universal or the general, thus confining a photograph’s meaning to individual things or instances. This conception of photography estranges the medium from painting, drawing or etching as

The photograph is thus [interpreted as] a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object. Its separation from true icons is felt through the absoluteness of this physical genesis, one that seems to short-circuit or disallow those processes of schematization or symbolic intervention that operate within the graphic representations of most paintings.⁵¹

In other words, a photograph as an index is distinct from a painting or drawing which privileges hierarchically details within its subject matter. Whereas a painting is a result of human volition, photography captures its subject or materiality with indifference to human mentality and perception.

⁴⁹Ibid., pp.95-6.

⁵⁰ Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 2.” *October*, Vol. 4 (Autumn, 1977). The MIT Press, p.59.

⁵¹ Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America.” *October*, Vol. 3 (Spring, 1977). The MIT Press, p. 75.

Photographer-scientists, confronted by photographic indexicality, were forced to resolve distinctions between the universality of typicality and the individuality inherent in photography. Since a photograph is limited to individual types, scientists were unsure as to what imagery could encompass an entire type and feared making such subjective judgments. To solve this problem, a tendency existed within scientific circles to collate data in a way that encouraged viewers to themselves to arrive at the generalizations and abstract judgments that science required, but that atlas makers were afraid to apply.

They [atlas makers] would no longer present typical phenomena, or even individual phenomena characteristic of a type. Rather, they would present a scatter of individual phenomena that would stake out the range of the normal, leaving it to the reader to accomplish intuitively what the atlas maker no longer dared to do explicitly: to acquire an ability to distinguish at a glance the normal from the pathological, the typical from the anomalous, the novel from the unknown.⁵²

While this method, in opposition to the work proffered by Francis Galton, was used in the nineteenth-century to distance scientism from subjectivity, a similar strategy was adopted by Cartier-Bresson in the twentieth-century in his mapping of human types.

We can see Bresson's divergence with Galton in regard to a specific question of type by regarding their method of display. Bresson did not organize his photo-portraits according to a physiognomic hierarchy that was typical of Galton's work. While Bresson's tendency to associate anonymous figures by nationality can be interpreted as a schematization of types, his work largely parallels the methods applied by scientists in opposition to the work of Galton. In general, Bresson's deployment of photography as an individualizing agent makes his treatment of types far more tentative than Galton's rigid approach.

Several photo-books published by Bresson are collated thematically by location, such as *The People of Moscow*, *About Russia*, *Europeans* and *Mexican Notebooks*. In these compilations,

⁵² Daston and Galison, p. 117.

Bresson omits elements of identification, such as name, vocation, or character. Though his organizational methods are suggestive of national types, his simultaneous aversion to typicality is manifest when he suggests that “There was a time when the world’s geography was illustrated through reproductions of great monuments or images of ethnic types; today that picture has been revamped by the addition of human elements provided by photography.”⁵³ Instead of evoking elements of typicality, captions accompanying his work reference only the subject’s setting and the year of creation. Bresson explains that

The captions [in *About Russia*] simply identify the geographical locations of the places. It was never my intention to paint a full picture but rather to note a number of significant facts, applying the strictest visual standards possible. I leave it up to those who leaf through these pages to answer the questions the photographs may pose or those that may arise in their minds as they look at them; in other words, the photographs should serve to stimulate the viewers’ own reflections.⁵⁴

From this, it is evident that Bresson’s system of human typicality aims not to communicate his personal beliefs. Rather than evoke a particular type through captions, Bresson seems to apply somewhat arbitrary and uninformative titles to accompany the image. Working analogously to a school of nineteenth-century scientists, Bresson provides a visual range of figures who are representative of a specific nationality, or particular type. His methodology, which exhibits a form of visual restraint concerning the imposition of human judgment on visual or typological imagery, parallels the tendencies practiced by nineteenth-century atlas makers. Like these scientists, Bresson collated related figures without substantial commentary in order to support an audience’s conception and recognition of types. Bresson also shifted the responsibility of generalization to audiences, being reluctant to do so himself. Indeed, he is even uncertain in his ability to arrive at generalizations. By giving works arbitrary titles he suggests that audiences

⁵³ Bresson, p. 54.

⁵⁴ Henri Cartier-Bresson, *About Russia*. New York: Viking Press, 1972.

should arrive at their own judgments and that categories of typicality are open to debate. In doing so, Bresson put his work in direct opposition to that of Galton. Galton's work, rather than encouraging audiences to construct opinions, taught viewers to recognize specific physiognomic traits in relation to human character.

From his work, it is clear that Bresson was against derogatory forms of typicality, yet he still encouraged a form of classifying individuals. In his introduction to *Europeans*, he explains that "[...] there is a *flâneur* side to the photographer, and if he is gifted with a methodical mind, he can use it to put together a sort of repertoire, or directory."⁵⁵ While this statement shows Bresson's inclination to publish photo-books and collate photographs by location and nationality, it also acknowledges the anthropological or scientific projects for which photographs may serve as documents. Perhaps aware of humankind's tendency toward stereotyping, as well as the means with which photo-portraiture has facilitated this historically, Bresson organized his book in such a way that references typicality without designating strict methods or scientific standards of identification. Instead of espousing a concrete method of cataloguing human types as biological or social in nature, as did Galton, Bresson's work draws on an audience's understanding of types to create an engaging and imaginative dialogue or narrative. Unlike Galton, whose understanding of human perception and recognition applied to both likeness and typicality, Bresson's conception of likeness and typicality is not informed by an innate imaging system unique to humans. Bresson applies the standards of painting to photography, in a way that relates to the work by Galton, to capture the most recognizable and successful likeness. He does not, however, do so to reveal physiognomic traits common to a group of individuals. Rather than disclose scientific observations surrounding human likeness, he evokes typicality by

⁵⁵ Henri Cartier-Bresson, "Europeans." *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographers*. 1st ed. New York: Aperture, 1999, p. 51.

organizing photographs thematically, and in essence, by creating a visual range of national norms. This encourages viewers to compare anonymous figures in relation to their personal conceptions of types. By offering minimal information concerning a human figure, he exhibits subjective moderation in a way that relates to a school of nineteenth-century atlas makers aware of photography's indexical, rather than universal or general nature.

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